

Iris Murdoch as a Moral Philosopher



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Plato's famous 'Cave Metaphor' in *Republic* clearly provides the fundamental frame for Murdoch's moral philosophy. The metaphor makes a strong impression with regard to the improvement of our understanding (*paideia and apaideusia*), but not so strong with regard to our *moral* improvement, and we may tend to lose sight of any moral enlightenment while examining the three stages in the metaphor. As a result, many rationalists who read the metaphor from perspective of modern science, put moral problems in parentheses, losing all sense of a moral reality. Needless to say, we must keep in mind that the sun (the Good) and the light (reality) are crucial in the metaphor. Our understanding goes with the light and its source. And, as we know, this is a central issue for Murdoch: to connect realism with a sense of the Good.

As it is, there is an important difference between Plato's and Murdoch's respective interpretation of the cave metaphor's third stage. Plato explains the preparatory procedures (adjustments or habits through dialectical method) for the climber who emerges from the cave to face the sun, and concludes explicitly that that the climber would finally be able to see and study the sun itself. Plato's explanation perplexes Murdoch, who is certain that the climber could not see the sun itself, even if he is accustomed to see its light. [We must remember the foreword quotation of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: 'Une difficulté est une lumière. Une difficulté insurmontable est un soleil' (Paul Valéry).] Murdoch wants to emphasise the *distance* of the sun from us. The sun itself is there with us, but so far away, not near us. This distance emphasises the transcendence of the sun. Thus, Murdoch seems to want to draw our attention to some religious practices or meditative trainings in attentiveness. Such practices and attitudes are for looking at individual realities through which we might be detached from the ego and led to a manner of spirituality.

On the other hand, the practices which Plato recommends in the final stage are metaphysical or purely mathematical, but not *moral* trainings, as were told in the preceding pages in *Republic*. The cave metaphor seems simply formally to be indicating *terminus ad quem* (a genuine first principle, the Good) which provides us with reality (truth) and understanding.

Are they, Plato and Murdoch, on different paths to the Good? Of course, we know that Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* show a spiritual way to the Beautiful and the enthusiasm of Love. These are full of enjoyments and sweet pains, and through which we may achieve a metaphysical insight into the idea of perfection. The idea resembles what Murdoch terms the 'magnetism' of (good) things to which we are drawn. So Plato and Murdoch may not seem so far apart. And yet we should not forget the intellectual training involved in Plato's dialogues. He never gives up on philosophy; it is the ultimate



training to reach the end (the Good), and the third stage for Plato is not merely a formal explanation. He also knows the pain and difficulty of philosophy, which is suggested everywhere in the metaphor. Not only is the light painful, but moral philosophy, too.